

TOWARD A MISSIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

By Robert H. Thune, 2005

The ways in which American Christians “do church” are shaped largely by what we believe church to be. Our *theology* determines our *methodology*. So as we plant new churches, it will do no good to try and reform the ways in which we *do* church without addressing the fundamental question of what church *is*.

This essay seeks to engage Scripture with the theological question, “What is ‘the church?’” Once we have answered this question, we will explore how the biblical answer affects the ways we “do church.”

A CHOSEN PEOPLE, SENT ON MISSION

I believe the most concise definition of the church is found in 1 Peter 2:9:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (NASB)

The epistle of 1 Peter is written to the chosen people of God who are scattered throughout the world (1 Peter 1:1- 2). Peter quotes the Old Testament profusely in this letter, applying Israelite promises to the New Testament church. In so doing, Peter affirms the organic continuity of God's people: the promises given to the Israelites apply to all who are children of Abraham by faith (Gal 3:7-9).

The central truth of 1 Peter 2:9 can be summarized in the following phrase: the church is **God's chosen people who exist to**

make him known. The four phrases chosen *race, royal priesthood, holy nation, and people for God's own possession* are four different ways of highlighting the church's nature as **God's chosen people**. The result clause *that you may proclaim...* declares the reason why God has called us: so that we might **make him known**.

THREE DEDUCTIONS FROM THIS TRUTH

If this summary statement is correct, we may deduce at least three principles from it.

Deduction #1: The church is God-centered.

The entire emphasis of 1 Peter 2:9 falls on what God has done for His people. He has chosen them. He has made them his priests. He has set them apart as a people who belong to him. He has called them out of darkness and into his light. And he has worked his grace among them in all these ways so that they might in turn proclaim his excellencies. The church exists because of God's work, and it exists for God's purposes.

Every modern church would claim to exist for the glory of God. Yet every modern church also struggles with self-love, self-interest, and self-absorption – after all, the church is made up of sinful human beings! 1 Peter 2:9 gives a clear mandate to church leaders that they must be relentlessly God-centered. Reform and repentance must be ongoing. When the church ceases to strive intentionally for the supremacy of God in everything, it falls short of its biblical calling. God must be on the agenda, all the time, in everything.

Deduction #2: The church is a community.

God has called a people, not persons. He is gathering a priesthood, not priests. He is



forming for himself a nation, not individuals. All the terms in 1 Peter 2:9 are communal words which place stress on the corporate nature of the church. But due to the impact of American individualism, we tend to read Scripture through a singular lens. We see the church as a collection of individuals rather than as an organic whole. The results of this viewpoint are easily seen: ministries are age-segregated to facilitate better *individual* attention; church programs are geared toward making the *individual* a better disciple of Christ; community is commended as something that's good for *me*. Rarely is much thought given to the communal nature of discipleship. This is a tragic error that must be remedied if we desire our churches to be biblical.

The biblical metaphor of a body made up of many parts is helpful here. A hand or an eye or a heart is only meaningful as part of a larger whole. We speak of "Bob's hand" or "Jill's eyes," betraying our intuitive understanding that they are a part of a greater whole. If Tom is having heart trouble, we are concerned for Tom, not for his heart. The body is more than the sum of its parts; in fact, the parts are only significant as pieces of the whole. The same is true of the church. The community must take precedence over the individual.

Deduction #3: The church is missional in nature. To say that the church is *missional* is simply to say that it exists to participate in God's mission. The church is a missionary force. A movement. God's called-and-sent people. The church is to be always moving forward, expanding the kingdom of God. This is clear in the "so that" statement in 1 Peter 2:9: you have been called "*so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.*"

Some observations about this phrase are worth belaboring. First, "you" is a plural noun. The proclamation in view here is not one person sharing a gospel tract with another

person, but rather the whole people of God proclaiming his excellencies. Second, the task of proclamation assumes that we are proclaiming God's excellencies to those who don't yet know them. (Contrast this with the sort of "proclamation" that goes on in many churches on Sunday morning, when most of those in attendance are already convinced). Third, and most importantly, notice what the mission of the church is. It is proclaiming God's excellencies. God's mission is not merely the redemption of human beings (though that is certainly *part* of the mission). Our redemption serves a greater purpose: we are chosen and possessed by God in order to proclaim his worth, his beauty, his goodness. So a missional church is not *only* about contextualizing the gospel or favoring the outsider; it is about the greater goal of declaring and portraying and delighting in the glory of God.

The church is to be a movement, not an institution. The church is to favor outsiders, not insiders. The church, as a community of God-centered people, is to proclaim God's glory in all of life.

HOW THESE DEDUCTIONS CHANGE THE WAY WE DO CHURCH

If these deductions are true, they must inform the way we "do church." It will do no good to nod our heads to these theological truths and then continue doing what we've always done. Our ecclesiology must inform our methodology. The clear teaching of God's Word about the nature of the church makes demands on our leadership, our structures, and our corporate gatherings.

Leadership: The job of pastors and leaders is the shaping of a communal culture.

Recognizing that the pendulum has swung quite far in the direction of individualistic ministry, leaders must correct this imbalance and see themselves as "cultural architects."



Their primary role is to shape the corporate life of the gathered community. If we would learn from the whole Bible, we would recall that this was exactly the job of the OT prophets, priests, and kings. These leaders were the shapers of a *nation*. Occasionally they would single out individuals, but most often they addressed the people *as a people*. Modern pastors must rediscover this vital role and apply their spiritual leadership toward the shaping of a God-saturated, Christ-exalting, others-focused *community*.

Structure: Communal mission is more important than individual ministry. The church is a gathered people, not a gathering of persons. Most structures in modern evangelicalism are geared toward the individual. Churches help individuals find their purpose, motivate them toward ministry, and teach them to use their spiritual gifts. But the result is a fragmented body with no corporate witness and no corporate identity. Modern-day churches are really no different from any other business offering self-improvement opportunities to individuals who are looking for a better life. If we would return to a New Testament model of church, we must rebuild our structures from the ground up in a way that places communal mission at the forefront. We must build **missional communities**, not individual disciples.

Practically, this means doing away with most age-segregated ministries and "what's-in-it-for-me" small groups. It means severely minimizing one-on-one discipleship and counseling (strategies which Jesus never employed). It means dismantling the notion that one can be a follower of Jesus without actively serving others. It means accepting into "membership" only those who are engaged in the communal mission of God's people (and not those whose only credential is an individual profession of faith). The structures of the church must be redesigned from top

to bottom toward the goal of creating, nurturing, and empowering missional communities.

Gatherings: Sunday morning is only part of the mission – not the whole mission. Many churches in America have adopted a front-door strategy: get people in the seats on Sunday morning and then try to move them into smaller groups from there. In this model, the bulk of the church's resources are directed toward the Sunday services. Congregations' expectations are set accordingly: they are taught to show up on Sunday morning and receive great worship and teaching. Many pastors bemoan the "consumerism" of American Christianity – but people are just doing what they've been taught to do! They are coming on Sunday morning to participate in the main event that their church has to offer.

But what if church leaders actually expected God's people to "do church" throughout the week? What if our definition of church actually involved people living out God's mission every day, in context of their actual lives? Then Sunday morning would simply become a gathering of missional people coming together to celebrate God's work, renew their covenant with him, and gain biblical vision and motivation for extending his kingdom. Churches would not need to have a "catch-all" approach to Sunday morning (edify the believer, pacify everybody's taste in worship, engage the seeker, welcome the newcomer, push the uninvolved toward small groups), because Sunday morning would no longer be the focal point of church life. Sunday morning would be one component of the church's communal life, and it could be designed specifically (and biblically) to help God's people encounter him, confess their sins, and receive his grace anew through word and sacrament. Rather than pushing people to "come to church," we would actually be equipping people to *be the church* in their ordinary lives. We believe this



is exactly the perspective on "church" that is mandated in 1 Peter 2:9.

In summary, 1 Peter 2:9 teaches that **the church is a God-centered missional community**. This is the theological conviction that fuels Coram Deo's vision and informs our views of leadership, structures, and Sunday morning gatherings. As we continue to plant new churches and help with the renewal and revitalization of existing churches, our methodology must remain rooted in a sound missional ecclesiology. In other words: how *we do church* must always flow out of what it means to *be the church*.

